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# ART PROBING AND WORLDMAKING. EXPLORING MUSEUM IMAGINARIES

Robert Willim

## *Possible worlds*

This article grapples with the question how artistic creative practice can be related to cultural analysis.<sup>1</sup> A broad open-ended explorative process through which ethnographic cultural analysis and art can be enmeshed will be proposed. This process will be related to discussions about museum imaginaries, digital culture and sensory aspects of ethnography. The point of departure for the discussion will be an audiovisual performance called *Possible Worlds*.

After a brief description of Possible Worlds, an elaboration of the mixes of art and cultural analysis will follow. Then a practice called *art probing* will be described and related to ethnological practice. Possible Worlds will be discussed as an art probe in relation to world-making and imaginaries, as well as elaborations on museums and the digital. Here the visualities of Possible World will be juxtaposed and compared with the *Google Art Project*. The text ends with a discussion about visual ethnography and how it can be related to practices of art probing, partly by addressing the interplay between detail and blur, between the exact and the ambiguous.

Since 2004 I have been working with ways to combine ethnological research with artistic practice. I have conducted a number of projects, both alone and together with various collaborators. In 2014 this work took me to *The Museum of Ethnography* in Stockholm, where I produced the work ›Possible Worlds‹, a surreal audiovisual journey presented as live performances. It was what I call an art probe and part of a more extended exploration of imaginaries. In order to create the art work, I had to use my competencies as both an artist and an ethnologist. The practicalities of working with digital audiovisual tools were entangled with conceptual considerations based on my experience as a researcher.

The premiere took place at the museum in Stockholm in the beginning of November 2014. It was the first of three performances arranged at very different locations during a period of five weeks. The first performance was commissioned by the museum and as an artist I was supposed to approach the question how museums summon different worlds and imaginaries. The idea for the work was spurred by a discussion between me and ethnologist Lotten Gustafsson Reinius who at the time was head of The Museum of Ethnography. Our joint discussion led to the commissioning of Possible Worlds.

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1 The work on this text has been made possible with support from SCACA (Swedish Center for Social and Cultural Analysis) at Halmstad University.



Ill. 1: Still image from *Possible Worlds*. Photo: Robert Willim

Two other iterations of the work were performed the same year as part of other events and in other spatial settings. The second took place at the symposium and festival for artistic research *Tacit or Loud: Where is The Knowledge in Art* at The Inter Arts Center in Malmö, December 2014. The third performance was arranged a week later in a space called ›The Multipurpose Room‹ at The Design Hub at RMIT University in Melbourne. This third performance was part of an international symposium on »uncertainties« organised by the *Design + Ethnography + Futures* initiative.<sup>2</sup> By iterating ›Possible Worlds‹ in different settings, the interplay between specific places for the performance and the evocation of other places or intangible worlds could be explored. At RMIT in Melbourne, video material from the very room of the performance was captured and mixed with the audiovisual material used in earlier performances, blurring the boundaries between the material and the mediated, between the site specific and the imaginary during the performance.

The first ›Possible Worlds‹ performance took place in a room called *The Myth Theatre* at The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, where digitally generated and live mixed sound and video was used to create a surreal 30-minute experience. Images and sounds from the museum storage and archives were enmeshed with my own field recordings and used to give perspective on ethnographic practice and the rendition of worlds in museums. It was a digitally engendered performance, an audiovisual montage and a compositing of

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2 URL: <http://d-e-futures.com> (25.10.2017).



*Ill. 2: The setup of Possible Worlds in the multipurpose room in Melbourne. Photo: Robert Willim*

layers of images and sound that summoned imaginaries and worked as the starting point to instil discussion and knowledge exchange.

The performance was followed by a roundtable discussion, and we had invited the public together with special guests like authors, experts of science fiction and surrealism, musicians, curators and scholars of anthropology and ethnology. Emotions and reflections evoked by the performance could be used as points of departure for discussion. Among the topics discussed were how to relate science fictional worlds to ethnographic fields, how different soundscapes are associated with spatial and temporal milieus or how the future might sound. Multiple realities, voodoo and shamanistic practice were also elaborated on, as well as the evocative role of certain objects. These discussions constituted ethnographic material and potential resources that could be analysed as part of further explorations.

### *Art probing as part of open-ended explorations*

›Possible Worlds‹ was part of a more extended explorative process. The work of ethnologists is sometimes referred to as explorative, but more often it is framed as cultural analysis. Several cultural and social researchers

label their work ›analysis‹. The word analysis implies a focussed practice, a detailed examination through which empirical material (or a specified data set) is scrutinised and taken apart (or deconstructed) in order to gain knowledge. The cultural analysis of ethnology, acquainted with disciplines like social and cultural anthropology as well as cultural studies, is often based on ethnographic fieldwork with a focus on examinations of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> This ethnological cultural analysis resembles, but also differs from, the interdisciplinary ditto proposed by humanities scholars like Mieke Bal. She proposes that:

»... in distinction from, say, cultural anthropology, ›cultural analysis‹ does not *study* culture. ›Culture‹ is not its object. The qualifier *cultural* in ›cultural analysis‹ indicates, instead, a distinction from traditional disciplinary practice within the humanities, namely, that the various objects gleaned from the cultural world for closer scrutiny are analysed *in view* of their existence in culture.«<sup>4</sup>

She emphasises the importance of the analysed object (e.g. an artwork or artefact) per se, but also its embeddedness in a cultural context. An ethnologist would probably start with the cultural context as the main target for analysis, using objects in order to better understand ways of life.

In their book *Exploring Everyday Life – Strategies for ethnography and cultural analysis* ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren together with anthropologist Richard Wilk discuss how cultural analysis and ethnography could be used in research to create surprise effects and study the hidden, overlooked and mundane but also mysterious dimensions of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> The eclectic bricolage of methods of ethnographic cultural analysis advocated by Ehn and Löfgren is a scholarly tradition that I have been in close contact with since my studies during the 1990s at Lund University, Sweden. Ehn and Löfgren have proposed that ethnologists should be open to combining various material categories and theoretical tools in a research practice open for the wild, the messy and the serendipitous. This brings to mind how anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has described ethnography as »an art of the possible«.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the promotion of mess and serendipity, Ehn and Löfgren still stress that there is need for a dimension of rigour and methodological structure even for a research process that embraces non-linearity and a progression that »stumbles along«.<sup>7</sup>

3 See Valdimar Tr. Hafstein/Peter Jan Margry: What's in a Discipline? In: *Cultural Analysis*, 13 (2014), pp. 1–9; Orvar Löfgren: The Black Box of Everyday Life. Entanglements of Stuff, Affects, and Activities. In: *Cultural Analysis*, 13 (2014), pp. 77–98.

4 Mieke Bal: *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto 2002, p. 9.

5 Billy Ehn/Orvar Löfgren/Richard Wilk: *Exploring Everyday Life: Strategies for Ethnography and Cultural Analysis*. Lanham 2015.

6 Ulf Hannerz: Being There ... And There ... And There!: Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography. In: *Ethnography* 4 (2003), pp. 201–216.

7 Billy Ehn/Orvar Löfgren: *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*. Berkeley 2010, p. 217 ff.

Even if Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk promote the practice of cultural analysis, the question is if it is not more explorative than analytical, which also the title »Exploring Everyday Life« hints at?<sup>8</sup> In that case, how is then exploration different from analysis? When the word explorative is used in relation to cultural research, it often indicates that the research is either done in an initial state of a project or that it has a quite open ended character.

To open-endedly move along is an important quality of the explorative process I advocate. A process is of course never totally open. Previous choices and a number of practical issues will affect what is possible to achieve. The openness of the process I suggest is a way to challenge often artificial boundaries. It is a way to move beyond ideas of (pre)specified and closed amounts of empirical data that should be examined in order to gain knowledge. To explore is to learn along the way while reaching for an ever intangible horizon, while analysis and examination is about surveying something limited, about dissection, scrutiny and detailed inspection. Exploration opens up, while analysis aims for finitude. An explorative approach might include partial analytic work which presents specific results and involves various stakeholders, but the results should be seen as provisional. Exploration as I use it is less about nailing a final result than it is about setting things in motion. It is transformative and mixes practices of analysis with creation and composition.

The explorative process of art and cultural analysis is related to the developments of non (or more than)-representational theory and methodology as it has been discussed within cultural geography and anthropology.<sup>9</sup> According to sociologist Phillip Vannini non-representational methodologies are to a lesser degree focussed on correct and appropriate representation of empirical material, of life-worlds and events, instead they are used to animate, to enliven, to resonate and create rupture and even to:

»... generate possibilities for fabulation. If indeed there is a quintessential non-representational style, then it is that of becoming entangled in relations and objects, rather than studying their structures and symbolic meanings.«<sup>10</sup>

This approach explicitly appreciates that there are manifold ways of knowing. Through its focus on the affective, the sensuous and the performative it embraces experiments that border on artistic practice. It has also been described as a new hybrid of science and art, which relates it to recent amal-

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8 Ehn et al., as in fn. 5, p. 131 ff.

9 From the perspective of cultural geography, see: *Hayden Lorimer: Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being »More-Than-Representational«*. In: *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005), pp. 83–94; *Nigel Thrift: Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Oxon 2007. From the perspective of anthropology, see: *Phillip Vannini: Non-Representational Ethnography: New Ways of Animating Lifeworlds*. In: *cultural geographies* 22 (2014), pp. 317–327.

10 Vannini, as in fn. 9, p. 320.



gamations of art and anthropology as well as the growing field of artistic research.<sup>11</sup>

The way I work with art and cultural analysis acknowledges ›combinations of‹ analytic work with creative artistic composition and performance. It can include analyses and conceptualisations of large and small patterns and relations. Through a process of parallel research strands and a meandering movement it appreciates chance and the provisional. Creative artistic work might stem from research questions, while the artwork might also feed back into analytic work. Cultural analysis as well as artistic practice could be understood as subsets of the broader and temporally more extended endeavour of an open-ended exploration. Within this framework art projects can include different stakeholders and collaborators and the artworks will have the role of ›art probes‹. They work as speculative instruments of evocation which might possibly inspire or feed back to the broader and more extended exploration.

### *Imaginary worlds and the unreachable horizon*

The Possible Worlds performances were art probes based on digital manipulation and composition of audiovisual material. Sound and images had been collected on trips to different parts of the world. These were combined with material from the archives and storage at the museum. Recordings from early ethnographic expeditions were combined with contemporary material from entirely different contexts. Imagery of objects and actions were enmeshed with undefined landscapes and mixed with computer generated electronic soundscapes in order to erase the border between technologically generated expressions and material captured at concrete locations.

The inception of the work was explicitly inspired by the tension between ethnographic representation and the ›worldmaking‹ practices of science fiction. This was one of the aspects I had been discussing with Lotten Gustafsson Reinius before the commissioning. The concept behind the work was not explicitly based on philosophical or literary Possible Worlds theories, even if these theories provoked the way the performance was conceptualised.<sup>12</sup> The

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11 For discussions about science and art hybridity of non-representational theory, see: *Phillip Vannini*: Non-Representational Research Methodologies. An Introduction. In: Phillip Vannini (ed.): *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*. London 2015, p. 3, as well as Thrift, as fn 9. For art and anthropology, see: *Arnd Schneider*: Three Modes of Experimentation with Art and Ethnography. In: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2008), pp. 171–194; *Arnd Schneider/Christopher Wright* (eds.): *Anthropology and Art Practice*. Oxford 2013. *Monique Scott*: ›White Walls, ›Black City‹: Reflections on ›Exhibition as Residency-Art, Anthropology, Collaboration‹. In: *Visual Anthropology Review* 30 (2014), pp. 190–198. For artistic research, see: *Henk Borgdorff*: *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Leiden 2012.

12 *Marie-Laure Ryan*: ›Possible Worlds‹. In: Jan Christoph Meister (ed.): *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg 2012 (18.5.2016). URL: <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/possible-worlds>.

performance Possible Worlds hinted at places and fragments of occurrences and locations, but its multi-layered and fragmentary character resisted exactitude and clear interpretation, making the character of the performance different from the way science fiction has been mostly based on fantastic but yet plausible scenarios. Were the worlds evoked by the performance then even possible or were they actually impossible? This is a question that I intentionally want to keep unanswered, especially as the question in its openness holds a suggestive power when it comes to understanding practices of ›worldmaking‹ and the inception of imaginary worlds.

›Worldmaking‹ which became a buzzword within digital media practices in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, extended practices of storytelling and the construction of worlds from literature, art and earlier moving media, as well as earlier theories of possible or multiple realities. ›Worldmaking‹ or world building appeared in everything from cultural theoretical publications to the promotion of design studio practices.<sup>13</sup>

›Worldmaking‹ and the appreciation of different ontologies were also part of the »Modes of Existence«-endeavour initiated and led by Bruno Latour. Based on a book by Latour and an ambitious web-based collaborative project centred at the »An Inquiry Into the Modes of Existence (AIME)«-website, it aimed at investigating »the Modern project« in order to remake it, to compose a common world and to reach a compromise for what was described as the acute global situation within the Anthropocene.<sup>14</sup> I appreciate the idea about different modes of existence. Anthropologist Kim Fortun also partly endorses the project in her article on Latour and late industrialism:

»In my reading, Latour offers us a semiotic theory not only of meaning, but of the world, which allows us to move, rather seamlessly, from facts and vaccines to the Anthropocene. And it is a powerful idea: the world – materiality – is not merely apprehended by cultural actors, it is also made by them, through material networks of mediators and habits. The world is not merely rendered meaningful, after the fact, it is produced as real through meaning. The notion of the Anthropocene draws this out with great force.«<sup>15</sup>

13 Henry Jenkins: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: 2006; Vera Nünning/Ansgar Nünning/Birgit Neumann (eds.): *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking*. Berlin, Boston 2010; Noah Wardrip-Fruin: *An Introduction to Alex McDowell's World Building*. In: *Journal of Digital Humanities* 3 (2014), pp. 4–5; Mark J. P. Wolf: *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York 2012.

14 See Bruno Latour: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Cambridge 2013, and the web-site »An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence« (18.5.2016). URL: <http://modesofexistence.org>. A forerunner to the project is Latour's article »An Attempt at a ›Compositionist Manifesto‹«. In: *New Literary History* 41 (2010), pp. 471–490.

15 Kim Fortun: *From Latour to Late Industrialism*. In: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2014), p. 314 f.



However, she also argues that the project is locked by its functionalist semiotics, and that the digital design and concept behind the web-based »AIME« endeavour:

»undercuts its promise of the new through its own embedded language ideology. Controlled vocabularies support ontologies that have been mapped in advance. The promise of a future beyond what we can now imagine requires something different.«<sup>16</sup>

Latour's functionalist semiotics leave out external aspects that do not fit the analytical system or the ideas of modes of existence. There is no room for that which is ›ambiguous‹ and ›beyond‹ or ›between‹ the concepts of a controlled vocabulary<sup>17</sup>. Latour and the team behind »AIME« especially acknowledge the role of protocols, lists of words and discrete project phases. I suspect there could be a possible flow chart for the project, aligning it with the rule based post-it note creativity often associated with innovation workshops, sessions and programs of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>18</sup>

The theoretical ›worldmaking‹ and ontological evocations of »Modes of Existence« work on an often abstract level, which makes them quite different from the way worlds have been built within media and the so called ›creative industries‹. A built imagined fictional world can house stories, beings, places, and events that can be experienced by gamers or watchers, users or audiences. These worlds can mimic geographical places, use fragments or properties from different locations, or be modelled from invented conceptions. The world building of computer games and moving media productions requires specific choices and a certain degree of detail, especially if they are to be presented visually. In the worlds of a computer game or a film, landscapes and characters need definite form and texture. Some kind of mapping is required. Things will have to unfold according to certain (programmed) laws, patterns and protocols (in this sense e.g. world building for games has similarities with the compositional design underpinning Latour's AIME-project).

In the 2010s teams behind game design, TV and film production were driven by the ambition to evoke experiences of »a whole world« based on convincing and possible designs and conceptions. They even designed how things would look, work, feel and unfold outside what appeared on screens and through other interfaces in order to create convincing worlds that could offer places for upcoming productions of various kinds. According to anthropologist Grant McCracken this broke with earlier major logics of media pro-

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16 Ibid., p. 318.

17 Ibid., p. 316.

18 Within these workshops, where participants were meant to creatively participate and contribute according to a predesigned scheme or procedure, there were never any doubts over who controlled the rules of the game, even if the workshops were framed as acts of collaboration.



Ill. 3: Still image from *Possible Worlds*. Photo: Robert Willim

duction, where nothing was constructed if it was not meant to appear on the screen or in the final production.<sup>19</sup>

When discussing the making of worlds, the question is what would be the wholeness of a world? No matter if a fictional world is made bigger than what is experienced on a screen or within a plot, it is never total or complete. There are borders to the sand boxes of game design or worlds of movies.<sup>20</sup> There is always a horizon with an unspecified beyond even if the attempt has been to build »a whole world«. This unspecified beyond is intrinsic to the very concept of imaginaries as I understand it, and a major inspiration for ›Possible Worlds‹.

Here I draw on anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano and the way he describes imaginaries as open-ended, indeterminate and never complete. They can be seen as frontiers, as elusive boundaries that never can be transgressed or reached.<sup>21</sup> However, imaginaries have a constant influence on the way reality is perceived, approached and handled, and on the way practices are spawned. According to Crapanzano frontiers, unlike borders and boundaries, cannot be crossed or transgressed. They make a change in the ontological

19 Grant McCracken: »How to Make TV Now (the ›Whole World‹ Approach)« (18.5.2016). URL: <http://cultureby.com/2016/04/how-to-make-tv-now-the-whole-world-approach.html>.

20 Some video games like *No Man's Land* (2016) were promoted as being based on almost infinite universes, built around a logic of procedural generation. But then again these universes were still limited by a predictable algorithmic world of data.

21 Vincent Crapanzano: *Imaginative Horizons. An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*. Chicago: 2004.

register. »They postulate a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation.«<sup>22</sup> He stresses what lies beyond the horizon and the possibilities it suggests, »the licit and illicit desires it triggers, the plays of power it suggests, the dread it can cause – the uncertainty, the sense of contingency, of chance – the exaltation, the thrill of the unknown it can provoke«.<sup>23</sup>

The audiovisual character of ›Possible Worlds‹ evoked the elusiveness and the ephemerality of imaginaries and the ungraspable beyond of Crapanzano's Imaginative Horizons, while it also challenged notions of time, context and what could be (ethnographically) represented. In this sense ›Possible Worlds‹ was a counterpoint to digital world building projects as well as to several of the digitisation projects like the *Google Art Project* that took place in museums and heritage institutions at the time.

### *The analytical power of detail and the lure of proximity*

The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm was part of the larger organisation *The National Museums of World Culture*. It consisted of four different museums located in Gothenburg and Stockholm.<sup>24</sup> In 2012 it was included in the digitisation initiative *Google Art Project*, which was part of the Google Cultural Institute. This made images of objects from the museum available online through Google's services. The images were provided in high resolution, so that users and viewers could zoom in details to examine and analyse the works. In May 2016 Google announced that they would provide even more detail and visual proximity to some artworks. With the ›Art Camera‹ they would use robotics, laser and sonar to capture the smallest of details of selected artworks. With this technology museums could, in Google's words, »increase the scale and depth« of access to a shared cultural heritage. The corporation pitched the technology by promising that users would be able to come closer than ever to museum objects and works of art:

»So much of the beauty and power of art lives in the details. You can only fully appreciate the genius of artists like Monet or Van Gogh when you stand so close to a masterpiece that your nose almost touches it. As you step back from the brush strokes, you wonder how it all comes together. At the Google Cultural Institute, we know that people love experiencing art in close detail. Millions of people spend time exploring our ultra-high resolution ›gigapixel‹ images, inch by inch – spotting something new every time, like a hidden signature or the individual dabs of paint that give the impression of shimmering, turbulent waters.«<sup>25</sup>

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22 Ibid., p. 14.

23 Ibid., p. 14.

24 See URL: <http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se>.

25 URL: <https://googleblog.blogspot.se/2016/05/art-camera-cultural-institute.html>.

This initiative entwined a number of art and heritage institutions in a homogenised system and through the interfaces of Google. Possibilities to share, compare and analyse all took place on a screen and through the services of the »Googleverse«. This promise to come close to objects and to achieve detailed proximity can be related to a wider discussion about proximity and distance in ethnographic museum practices. Objects acquired from faraway places were once incorporated in collections of museum institutions, and subsequently stored away or presented for museum visitors. The origin of the objects could be used either to evoke fascination because of its exotic otherness, or the geographical distance could be played down in favour of an appreciation of the object per se. It is however often claimed that museums have decontextualised and severed the bonds with the original context of acquired objects. In an article about The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg (part of the same organisation as The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm) Mikela Lundahl and Lisa Karlsson Blom argue that the movement of objects into storage away from exhibition spaces is an ordering action that reflects a colonial mind-set focused on dis-remembering, a way to hide things that might be testimony to earlier inglorious colonial practices. They pose the question if it is: »... even possible to imagine museums without objects, or do they then become something else?«<sup>26</sup>

Placing objects in storage is an obvious way of distancing museum visitors from objects. However, also in exhibition areas a distance between audience and objects has been maintained. For example, the glass case as an exhibition technology, creating a protective distance while exposing objects visually, has become more or less emblematic to the museum as an institution, especially as it was conceptualised over the course of a century. According to Brita Brenna, who has studied the role of glass cases in the natural history museum *Bergen Museum* in Norway, glass became crucial for the way public museums developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

»With the help of glass the objects could be locked up, safe from dirt, dust and the touch of visitors, who could thus move around the museum without constant supervision. Glass could be given the duty to organize the geography of the museum, to allow some bodies to access some spaces, and to prevent others.«<sup>27</sup>

Questions about access, and who was allowed to come close to different objects, were inscribed in the very concept of a museum. How to act while visiting a museum was something people learned through what Helen Rees Leahy calls »prestigious imitation«. She connects the concept, drawn from Marcel Mauss, to embodied museum practices and how visitors learned how to approach museum objects, how to move around in a museum and which

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26 Mikela Lundahl/Lisa Karlsson Blom: Haunted Museums. Ethnography, Coloniality and Sore Points. In: Eurozine 1 (2012), pp. 1–8.

27 Brita Brenna: Nature and Texts in Glass Cases. The Vitrine as a Tool for Textualizing Nature. In: Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies 2 (2014), pp. 46–51.

affective registers were appropriate while visiting an exhibition. According to David Howes, this:

»[...] resulted in the interposition of more and more distance between the average museum visitor and the work of art or exotic artifact, whether there were physical barriers (a glass case, a rope) or not. Only curators and connoisseurs were permitted to handle objects on account of their expert knowledge, and only curators possessed the authority to interpret objects.«<sup>28</sup>

Looking was for visitors, touching for professionals. If the transparent glass case was the emblem of museum visitor experiences, the thin white gloves signified professional museum management. The white gloves were also part of the highly ritualised practices of accessing objects in storage beyond exhibition spaces, as Lotten Gustafsson Reinius has pointed out.<sup>29</sup>

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the visual museum experience was often changed into more multisensorial approaches. Various kinds of interactive and participatory exhibition designs favoured practices of touching, smelling and proprioceptive experiences. Practices of pressing buttons, touching screens, listening to, smelling and sensing material led to new proximities and distances.

When objects were exposed through the *Google Art Project* it was however an extension of the glass case visualisation practice established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This time the physical museum and exhibition space was challenged. The project was based on a virtual »Googleverse« museum without physical objects. What was promoted was a new kind of digitised and technology enhanced proximity. Visitor became user. Objects were untouchable, while visually available behind a screen of glass. By zooming into the image, using a kind of digitally enhanced magnifying glass, a detailed examination of the objects became possible. Through this service the physical object was still distant, stored away in darkness in some unreachable storage. The user experiencing the visual proximity of the object could be far away from the storage, located at a screen in Sweden, Nigeria, Japan or somewhere else. If the glass case was a kind of mediation device, Google's digitisation project transmuted this device into something else. Detailed proximity to museum objects was now available through a complex industrial infrastructure of imaging robots, data centres and networked technology.

While the *Google Art Project* was promoted as an endeavour offering unprecedented potential for detailed and comparative analysis, there were still things unspecified and beyond the reach of the detailed proximity of the

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28 David Howes: Introduction to Sensory Museology. In: *The Senses and Society* 9 (2014), p. 261.

29 Lotten Gustafsson Reinius: Sensing through White Gloves: On Congolese Objects in Swedish Sceneries. In: *The Senses and Society* 4 (2009), pp. 75–97.

imaged artworks and artefacts. Regardless of the level of digital fidelity of a project like this, there were hidden external aspects at play.<sup>30</sup>

Next to every image of artworks on the website of the *Google Art Project* a short caption specified the context and origin of the imaged object. Here the name of the work was stated together with time, place and artist. But not always, in the place next to the zoomed in details of images from The National Museums of World Culture, where names of artists were supposed to be exposed, the two words »by Unknown« stated a kind of unspecified beyond. No Paul Klee, Banksy or John Muir. The identity of artists, makers and users behind several of the items in the museum had been impossible to reveal, or it had simply never been of interest once the things were acquired. However, what a visitor to the museum could often learn was who had once collected figurines, Thankas, vases and sculptures during expeditions, or if the objects had been part of some particular transaction or exchange (if something eg. was a gift from the Shah of Iran to a former Swedish King). Also when and from where objects had been brought to Sweden could be stated. But the names of the people behind the artefacts were undisclosed, mysterious, and part of an ungraspable imaginary beyond.

### *The evocative power of blur*

In contrast, ›Possible Worlds‹ was not about detail. It was hinting at unspecified worlds. In its first iteration it also evoked connections to different parts of The Museum of Ethnography. When ›Possible Worlds‹ was performed, one central exhibition of the museum was *The Storage*. It was called an ethnographic treasure-trove and a glimpse into the magic of the collections. Its over 6000 objects had few labels. There were some thematic trails, but the visitors were encouraged to discover for themselves on a quest for inspiration for the future. It was also framed as a »third space« in which storage, exhibition, the public, databases and collections could meet.<sup>31</sup> This latter notion was possibly inspired by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial writings on hybrid spaces as a way of: »... conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*« (Bhabha 2004: 56).<sup>32</sup> Bhabha's third spaces are locations where ambiguity resides, where in-betweenness is appreciated. The Storage encouraged the visitor to discover, but also to »delve deeper into the details«. Still it blurred the distinctions, labels, categories, stories and worlds evoked by different museum and her-

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30 There are similarities between the *Google Art Project* and Latour's AIME-project. Both are aimed at collecting, composing and enfolding entities into a common system or world-making venture, in which technological and organisational choices affect the way it evolves.

31 URL: <http://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/en/etnografiskamuseet/exhibitions/aktuella-utställningar/the-storage-an-ethnographic-treasure-trove/the-storage-an-ethnographic-treasure-trove/>.

32 Homi K. Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*. London 2004.



itage professionals as well as other stakeholders. Without explicitly evoking the concept of third spaces Possible Worlds was aimed at a further blurring of boundaries, even to use blur, the ambiguous and the indistinct as epistemological assets or catalysts.

Possible Worlds was an artwork and not visual anthropology or ethnography; nevertheless it should be understood in relation to ethnographic visualisation practices. Explicit uses of blur and the ambiguous had appeared as part of several scholarly works within anthropology. When, in the 1970s, Steven Feld wrote his groundbreaking book *Sound and Sentiment* about the sonic world of the Kaluli people in New Guinea, he used two juxtaposed photographs, one detailed portrait and one blurry, in order to raise questions and make a theoretical statement about the role of illustration and evocation in ethnographic work.<sup>33</sup> In a later edition of his book he wrote about (photographic) blur as a way to embrace phenomenology and the senses as well as a way to stress »alternatives to the stability of realism and documentary literalism in anthropological image making«. <sup>34</sup> It was a way to humbly »switch from exegetic exhaustion to pictorial pleasure, by staging an encounter of relational epistemologies: an experiment in experiencing, evoking, and embracing the blur«. <sup>35</sup>

In a text about visual anthropology and epistemology Chris Wright and Rupert Cox discuss how Feld uses photographic blur in order to elicit movement between different perceptual worlds.<sup>36</sup> They also propose that the opposition between documentation and art when using visual technologies like cameras should be transcended. The camera is often conceived of as either a recording device or as a tool for skilled expression, as something used to (effectively) document or to (evocatively) express.<sup>37</sup> Wright and Cox instead advocate a »reformulation of the concept and method of the visual as a relational enfolding or entanglement of the elements«. <sup>38</sup>

In an overview and discussion of some of the digital tools available at the beginning of the 2010s, Paolo Favero also suggests that we need to move beyond a narrow definition of the field of vision and instead approach: »im-

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33 *Steven Feld: Sound and Sentiment. Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression.* Durham, London 2012. See also *Schneider*, as fn 11. For a discussion on the way »skeptical modes of perception« could be utilised in order to better understand processes of mediation, see: *Sarah Kareem: Flimsy Materials, or What the Eighteenth Century Can Teach Us About Twenty-First Century Worlding.* In: *Critical Inquiry* 42 (2016), pp. 374–394.

34 *Ibid.*, p. xxx.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Chris Wright/Rupert Cox: Blurred Visions: Reflecting Visual Anthropology.* In: Richard Fardon/Olivia Harris/Trevor HJ Marchand/Mark Nuttall/Chris Shore/Veronica Strang/Richard A. Wilson (eds.): *The Sage Handbook of Social Anthropology.* London: 2012, p. 122.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 120.



Ill. 4: Still image from *Possible Worlds*. Photo: Robert Willim

ages as relational items situated amidst the events, socialness and physicality of actors' everyday lives. In other words, we have to get our hands dirty (again)«. <sup>39</sup> Favero discusses different visual technologies, but also promotes collaboration through digital social media services as ways to blur the distinctions between genres and practices.

Filmmaker Christian Suhr and anthropologist Rane Willerslev also argue for ways to transcend documentary ethnographic film. They propose that the disruptive devices of visual montage have the potential to show the invisible and: »can and must be used to break the mimetic dogma of the humanized camera, thus enabling an enhanced perception of the social realities depicted in ethnographic films«. <sup>40</sup> Inspired by early experimental Russian filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein they define montage as »cinematic rearrangement of lived time and space«, as a production technique based on the juxtaposition of shots in the editing room but also on the way film per se is an assembly of framed images sequenced into an experienced visual flow. <sup>41</sup> The camera should be understood as something that might transcend ordinary human perception. <sup>42</sup>

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39 Paolo Favero: Getting Our Hands Dirty (Again): Interactive Documentaries and the Meaning of Images in the Digital Age. In: *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (2013), p. 261.

40 Christian Suhr/Rane Willerslev: Can Film Show the Invisible? In: *Current Anthropology* 53 (2012), p. 283.

41 Ibid., p. 285.

42 Ibid.

Suhr and Willerslev however also stress that: »using film to reveal the invisible aspects of social life depends crucially on maintaining a tension between a strong sense of reality and its occasional, and therefore only then effective, disruption through montage«. <sup>43</sup> They propose a tense balance between realism and constructivism, simplicity and complexity, resonance and dissonance. They argue that if the affinity with realism is abandoned, what is left is nothing but obscure haze. <sup>44</sup>

### *The craft of composing imaginary worlds*

In ›Possible Worlds‹ realism was abandoned. Obscure haze was embraced. The inference about unreachable horizons of imaginary worlds was the conceptual core of the ›Possible Worlds‹ performance. Flickering and shifting multilayered figments hinted at an elusive horizon and an enticing beyond. In this sense, ›Possible Worlds‹ was something else than the ethnographic films trying to capture the invisible that Suhr and Willerslev have advocated. As an artwork ›Possible Worlds‹ could work in a different register than an ethnographic film, even if it also got some of its energy from being compared to ethnographic practice. There have been several ethnographic films that have challenged understandings of realism in the ethnographic genres, and that experiment with the ideas about how to make something visible or possible to experience. <sup>45</sup> In 2012 Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V  r  na Paravel released *Leviathan*. This was a film playing with ideas about imaginary worlds and challenging notions of realism. Its surreal, dream-like and poetic style evokes a disorienting and saturated world aboard and around a fishing vessel off the American East Coast:

»in the very waters where melville’s pequod gave chase to moby dick, leviathan captures the collaborative clash of man, nature, and machine. shot on a dozen cameras – tossed and tethered, passed from fisherman to filmmaker – it is a cosmic portrait of one of mankind’s oldest endeavors.« <sup>46</sup>

In a comment to *Leviathan*, anthropologist Christopher Pinney relates it to what he calls aqueous modernity and the emergence of an aesthetics of submersibility, characterised by movements between the above and below and the inside and outside. Through these filmic movements the audience is never sure whether it is in or out of the water, what is actually visualised or where the horizon is. <sup>47</sup> These movements challenge the very concept of a horizon, aligning the film with a visuality that artist Hito Steyerl in a thought

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>45</sup> See: *Paul Henley: The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema*. Chicago 2009; for an account of the works of Jean Rouch who challenged several assumptions about what an ethnographic film could be.

<sup>46</sup> URL: <http://www.arretetonlinecinema.org/leviathan/presskit.html>.

<sup>47</sup> *Christopher Pinney: Aqueous Modernism*. In: *Visual Anthropology Review* 31 (2015), p. 36.

experiment has called verticality. This is distinguished by a: »fall toward objects without reservation, embracing a world of forces and matter, which lacks any stability and sparks the sudden shock of the open: a freedom that is terrifying, utterly deterritorializing, and always already unknown«.<sup>48</sup>

Anthropologists Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn have called *Leviathan* an ethnographic dream, provoking questions about attachment and sympathy through the dissolution of reference points and stable identities of protagonists and spectators.<sup>49</sup> In another text Eduardo Kohn, who was one of the proponents of the so called ontological turn within anthropology, saw *Leviathan* as an example of what he calls ontological poetics. This is a practice that cultivates a representational craft in order to become attuned to other kinds of (non- or more than human) realities:

»*Leviathan*, which takes place on, around, as well as under and above a deep-sea fishing vessel, is an example of anthropology as ontological poetics. Multiple cameras attached to bodies, thrust under water, or mounted on different parts of the ship disrupt any singular human perspective or narrative. The result is a disturbing dissolution of the self as we become enveloped in a monstrous marine world of piscine creatures, reeling boats, butchered bodies, and diving gulls. *Leviathan* presents no argument and certainly no metaphysics; rather, it dissolves many of the conceptual structures that hold us together so that we can be made over by the unexpected entities and forces that emerge from the depths.«<sup>50</sup>

Kohn writes about the the immersive and dizzying experience the film offers. One stable reference point in this kind of ethnographic film (or dream) is however offered through the description and caption that it all takes place on a hulking deep sea fishing vessel. It is, in spite of its experimental and challenging style, framed as a documentary. It is also communicated that the ethnographers or filmmakers and the sound artist were present onboard, handling and distributing cameras and recording equipment. The processes of capturing material for the film is stressed, and the type and number of cameras (a dozen, Go-Pros) are specified. The film should be understood as an account of a certain practice, localised in a certain context, a practice not *described* but *depicted*.<sup>51</sup>

Kohn calls the ethnographic practice behind films like *Leviathan* »a representational craft«. Possible Worlds, however, was an artwork and not a work of visual anthropology or ethnography. It was more about evocation

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48 *Hito Steyerl*: In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective. In: *e-flux journal* 24 (2011), p. 9.

49 *Lisa Stevenson/Eduardo Kohn*: *Leviathan*: An Ethnographic Dream. In: *Visual Anthropology Review* 31 (2015), p. 52.

50 *Eduardo Kohn*: Anthropology of Ontologies. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015), p. 313.

51 *Lucien Taylor*: Iconophobia. In: *Transition* 69 (1996), pp. 64–88.



*Ill. 5: Still image from Possible Worlds. Photo: Robert Willim*

than representation or documentation. As an artist, I had an intentional aim to not precisely point out the origin of the used audiovisual material. It was not of immediate interest what kind of camera, lenses or further technologies or circumstances had been used to capture the different parts used in the blended layers of the work. The audiovisuals were based on digital compositing and mixing, and the central characteristic of it was conceived using digital tools like Final Cut Pro (for the visuals) and Ableton Live (for the sound as well as the audiovisual performance).

Rather than framing my art probing as a representational craft of ontological poetics, as Kohn calls the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, I would call it a ›compositional craft‹ through which mixing, blending and transmuting become crucial practices.<sup>52</sup> I do not abandon the possibility of representation, but the practice of composition and even rendition should be seen as the primary concern. The performance was mainly based on the evocation of imaginary worlds decoupled from sites of recording and filming. It was intended to challenge any attempt of clear interpretation or final resolution. There was no (ethnographic) world that should be depicted, represented or conveyed, instead associations, feelings and glimpses of imaginary worlds were meant to emerge during the 30-minute performance. As an art probe *Possible Worlds* could be distanced from questions about the epistemology (or ontology) of ethnographic operations, but it could also work

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Tom O'Dell/Robert Willim: Composing Ethnography*. In: *Ethnologia Europaea* 41 (2011), pp. 26–39 and *Tom O'Dell/Robert Willim: Rendering Culture and Multi-Targeted Ethnography*. In: *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 45 (2015), pp. 89–102.

as a kind of counterpoint that gave perspective on scientific ethnographic practice.

### *Composing surrealities*

When organising the event at the museum we decided to underline its surrealist dimension. We even invited an expert on surrealism in the roundtable discussion following the performance. This placed the event and the project in a longer genealogy of connections between the artistic surreal and scientific practice. Art, ethnography and the surreal have often been entangled, most notably in France at the time between the two world wars. An often cited text when it comes to meetings between surrealism and ethnography is James Clifford's elaboration on the Surrealist movement and its relation to ethnographic expeditions and the establishment of museums in Paris before the Second World War.<sup>53</sup> He describes a time in Western Europe when earlier more or less confident cultural orders were challenged, opening up for curious searches for alternative realities outside the occidental world. Others appeared: »as serious human alternatives; modern cultural relativism became possible.«<sup>54</sup> In this context ethnography and the artistic avant-garde were on speaking terms:

»The postwar context was structured by a basically ironic experience of culture. For every local custom or truth, there was always an exotic alternative, a possible juxtaposition or incongruity. Below (psychologically) and beyond (geographically) any ordinary reality there existed another reality. Surrealism shared this ironic situation with relativist ethnography.«<sup>55</sup>

Of course this was also a time in Europe when the colonial was still prevailing. Clifford's mostly positive account of ways in which French expeditions to Africa could be coupled to emerging art movements in Paris has moreover been criticised or further problematised:

»(T)he surrealist movement's interest in non-Western art and artifacts often placed them in a paradoxical position: Their political opposition to colonialism was at times undermined by their fascination with the

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53 James Clifford: On Ethnographic Surrealism. In: Comparative Studies in Society and History 23 (1981), pp. 539–564.

54 Ibid., p. 542.

55 Ibid.



possibilities the unfamiliarity of such objects offered to interrogate what it meant to be human.«<sup>56</sup>

Surrealists used juxtapositions and combinations of material that evoked new associations, that provoked and potentially challenged boundaries. Writing about the surrealist publication ›*Documents*‹ with its editor Georges Bataille, Clifford argues that it is: »a kind of ethnographic display of images, texts, objects, labels, a playful museum which simultaneously collects and reclassifies its specimens«.<sup>57</sup> The very practices of juxtaposition and collage used in publications like documents and in surrealist art in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century resembles the way ethnographic endeavours developed into continually: »composing and decomposing culture's ›natural‹ hierarchies and relationships«.<sup>58</sup> According to Clifford these movements of art and ethnography could raise questions about emerging heritage institutions and about classification and the ways in which value was engendered.

15 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century there was once again a need for asking new questions about the possibilities of representation and the evocation of ethnographic worlds. New stakeholders had entered museum worlds. New power relations surfaced. Endeavours like the *Google Art Project* and the ›Google Cultural Institute‹ strived to weave together material into their ›Googleverse‹ and to increase possibilities for an ever more detailed inspection and close analysis of objects in heritage and museum organisations. The question is what could reside beyond the details that were being inspected and analyzed? How would the development spurred by this kind of large-scale corporate driven endeavour affect people's experiences of heritage and the societal role of museums?

One way to probe this uncertain world of heritage, memory and new possible worlds and digitally enhanced futures could be to artistically evoke surrealities and an unspecified beyond in order to gain new perspectives and potential for the production of new knowledge. This was one of the roles of Possible Worlds. It worked to probe the interplay between imaginaries, mediation and technologies in museum contexts. This part of a more extended exploration process of imaginaries and digital technology accentuated doubt and ambiguity instead of short sighted certitude. When this artistic part of the process was shifted to more analytical phases it also shifted to methodological discipline and exactitude of arguments that strived for new provi-

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56 Dana Strand: Aesthetics, Ethnography, and Exhibition at the Quai Branly. Symposium. In: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures 67 (2013), p. 38. The question about appropriation is of course always a hot topic when it comes to artistic practice and re-use of objects or influences from different contexts. For an elaboration on appropriation and global visual art, see: Arnd Schneider: On ›Appropriation‹. A Critical Reappraisal of the Concept and Its Application in Global Art Practices. In: Social Anthropology 11 (2003), pp. 215–229.

57 Clifford, as fn 53, p. 550 f. See also Linda M. Steer: Photographic Appropriation, Ethnography, and the Surrealist Other. In: Comparatist 32 (2008), pp. 63–81.

58 Clifford, as fn. 53, p. 551.

sional insights.<sup>59</sup> This very text can be seen as one result of cultural analysis based on art probing. It says something about the way artistic practice can be combined with ethnography, and it suggests how imaginaries might emerge between the museum storage and the horizon.



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59 Examples of other results from the analytical parts of my explorations are: *Robert Willim*: Transmutations of Noise. In: Barbara Czarniawska/Orvar Löfgren (eds.): *Coping with Excess. How Organizations, Communities and Individuals Manage Overflows*. Cheltenham 2014; *Robert Willim*: Imperfect Imaginaries. Digitization, Mundanisation and the Ungraspable. In: Gertraud Koch (ed.): *Digitisation. Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research*. London 2017.